



Senator

Mary Margaret Haugen

10th Legislative District

Legislative Report

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10th Legislative District

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Committees:

- Transportation, Chairman
- Government Operations & Elections
- Rules

Spring 2006

Dear Friends,

The 2006 legislative session was as productive as it was busy. Although sessions in even-numbered years, also known as "short sessions," are typically devoted to modest efforts to update the two-year budget passed in odd-numbered years, this year we passed an unusually high number of landmark bills for a 60-day session.

The more publicized of these measures included the crackdown on sex predators, the breakthrough compromise on medical malpractice, and alternatives to the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). But you might not have heard of some other equally important bills, including several I considered especially urgent. As chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, much of my time was dedicated to solving some of our state's pressing transportation issues. Also high among my priorities, however, were the repeal of the nursing home bed tax, tax exemptions for seniors on properties that can't be subdivided, and protections for small farmers filing voluntary farm plans in an effort to be good stewards of their land. You will find details on these and other bills inside this newsletter.

As always, I invite your thoughts, questions and concerns about issues that are important to you. Although the legislative session has ended, our district's needs continue year round. Please do not hesitate to contact me with a letter, a call to my office or the toll-free legislative hotline, or by e-mail.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mary Margaret Haugen".

Mary Margaret Haugen
State Senator
10th Legislative District

Highlights of the **2006** Legislative Session

- ☒ Staying the course on transportation
- ☒ Easing the pressures on small farmers and our seniors

Transportation

As the chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, I had two goals for this year's supplemental budget – to stay the course with the projects we've launched to provide safe travel, and to ensure we are making the absolute most of our limited resources.

To reach the first goal, we continued to implement the projects in the 2003 Nickel Package and the 2005 Transportation Partnership Package. Projects funded by the Nickel Package, passed in 2003, include \$3.38 billion for highways; \$299 million for ferries, including an upgrade to the Mukilteo and Anacortes terminals; \$239 million for rail, including \$165 million for track improvements between Bellingham and Vancouver, Clark County; and \$236 million for public transportation.

Projects funded by the Transportation Partnership Package, which was approved by the voters in 2005, include more than 200 highway, bridge and inter-section improvements in every county in the state. The plan also includes funding for freight rail, passenger rail, bus service, park & ride lots, and other proven strategies that take vehicles off the road. The projects are financed through a 9.5 cent increase in the gas tax phased in over the next four years and small annual weight fees on passenger vehicles. To reach the second goal, we set aside money for natural events like flooding and landslides and we provided funding for 18 additional Washington State Patrol troopers to make up for troopers who had been shifted from patrolling roads to monitoring ferry terminals.

Our transportation needs haven't changed, but the way we do business has. To improve planning and cooperation between regional organizations, we required that the Regional Transportation Investment District (RTID) and Sound Transit propose projects on a single 2007 ballot, with both measures required to pass in order for either to be approved. We also established a commission that will devise a central, independent and nonpartisan governing body for regional transportation. To improve efficiency and accountability, we revised the responsibilities

of the Washington State Department of Transportation and the Washington State Transportation Commission. To raise the quality of driver training, we passed laws to hold driving schools and instructors accountable for bad instruction. We also revised the formula for the local Motor Vehicle Excise Tax to more fairly provide accurate vehicle valuation and depreciation, reflecting the lower prices buyers actually pay.

Ferries remain a crucial component of our transportation solutions. To sustain passenger-only ferry service, we directed the state to continue to provide existing services until they can be taken over by local governments or, in some cases, their contractors, and we ordered the sale of two out-of-use ferries to establish a fund to provide grants for capital and operating assistance. In addition, we revised guidelines for state ferry employee contracts to coincide with the biennial fiscal schedule and incorporate other efficiencies into the contract process.

Coming soon: A Stanwood stop for the Amtrak Cascades commuter train. The DOT is evaluating site selection for a Stanwood stop to the Amtrak train route from Vancouver, B.C., to Portland.

Repealing the nursing home bed tax

Few things have been more infuriating for me to see, or more satisfying to rectify, than the daily \$6.50 bed tax charged to patients in nursing homes. I tried to eliminate this tax last year, but my bill was amended at the last minute to allow a slow phase-out of the tax by 2011. This year I was able to win support for repealing the tax altogether by July 1, 2007. It's still not soon enough to suit me, but at least we're getting rid of it. Our seniors deserve better.

A property tax break for seniors

I sponsored this exemption to help seniors and disabled retirees cope with rising land values that are taxing them out of their homes. This bill extends an existing property tax exemption on one-

acre properties in rural areas up to five acres for land that cannot be subdivided, and applies to anyone who: is 61 years old or older in the year of application, or is retired due to disability, or is a veteran of the United States armed forces with a 100 percent service-connected disability; and has a disposable income of \$35,000 or less.

Protection for voluntary farm plans

I sponsored this bill to make it easier for farmers to voluntarily improve environmental conditions on their land and preserve the rural nature of our district for future generations. In some areas of the state, and particularly on Whidbey Island, farmers had stopped working with conservation districts for fear of excessive disclosure of their voluntary farm plans.



The bill clarifies that farm plans are not automatically subject to public disclosure without the farmer's permission; however, plans that require permits, such as for federal and state water quality laws, are subject to disclosure. The bill also directs conservation districts to inform farmers, before the preparation of a farm plan, of the information that is subject to public disclosure. Lastly, the bill specifies that farm plans used for permit purposes under federal or state water quality laws are subject to the specific disclosure provisions that apply to those programs. Our farmers fight every day to stay in business, and farms are an essential part of our rural character. We should not be making it more difficult for farmers to be good stewards of their land.

OTHER LEGISLATIVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS



Making the WASL work for all students **We want all students to meet strong standards, and we want to help students succeed academically.**

This year's 10th-grade class is the first for which the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) is a requirement for graduation. We authorized a study of barriers to student success and ways to help students perform better, and we approved alternative methods of assessment for students who struggle with traditional tests. Students who fail the WASL may still graduate if their grades equal or exceed the grades of selected peers who passed the WASL, or if they submit a portfolio of work that demonstrates academic competence,

or if they achieve a required score for mathematics on other tests such as the SAT. We set aside \$28 million for tutoring, before- and after-school programs and summer school for students who need extra help meeting academic standards.

Tougher laws for sex predators

We increased the penalties for sex predators, and we did it the right way – by consulting prosecutors and law enforcement experts on how to put the most predators behind bars without discouraging victims from coming forward.

We approved minimum 25-year prison sentences for predatory and violent sex offenses against children and vulnerable adults. We increased registration requirements and penalties for failing to register. We increased penalties for “precursor crimes” such as voyeurism, possession of child pornography and Internet grooming. We also added \$2 million to the budget to assist victims and to provide additional space for incarceration.

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Medical malpractice

We brought doctors and lawyers together to work on a solution. After the failure of Initiatives 330 & 336 in the fall, it was clear voters expected the Legislature to come up with a solution in this situation. Negotiated by Gov. Chris Gregoire, this landmark legislation uses mediation and binding arbitration to lower the cost of litigation, lets medical professionals review malpractice claims to weed out frivolous lawsuits, and allows doctors to apologize for medical mistakes without it being used against them in court.

Heating assistance

We steered relief to those who need it most. To help an additional 14,000 low-income people stay warm this winter, we increased funding for the Low-Income Heating and Energy Assistance Program by \$7.6 million.



Maintaining dikes and drains

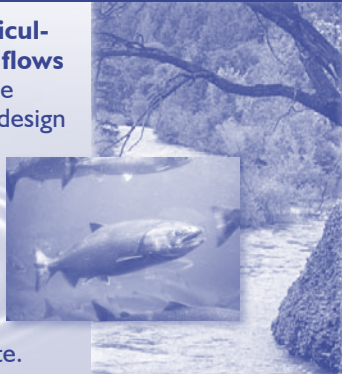
We ensured timely maintenance on drains and dikes. With flooding always a concern in the Skagit Valley, I sponsored this bill to encourage prompt response and coordination between drainage districts and the state Department of Transportation (DOT), particularly during rainy season and in the spring when water is needed for crops. If commissioners of drainage or diking districts determine that maintenance or repairs are required on a drainage facility under the jurisdiction of the state DOT, they can now request DOT response within 14 days and, if the DOT fails to respond, can independently contract the work and then be reimbursed by the DOT.

Stabilizing state pension funds

To catch up on the state's shortfall on pension funding, we created the Pension Funding Stabilization Account. This fund sets aside \$350 million for future costs while adjusting employer pension contributions to pay an additional \$50 million for unfunded liabilities this biennium. Along the way, this budget saves taxpayers \$30 million in interest on unfunded liability costs.

Balancing water rights and stream flows

We budgeted \$455,000 to balance agricultural water rights and healthy stream flows in the Skagit Delta. The funds will enable landowners and local drainage districts to design a plan that allows land use in ways that help salmon recovery and maintain clean, sufficient water flows in our streams. The plan will evaluate everything from flooding to current irrigation needs and practices to new technologies and efficiencies. I expect the resulting plan to provide a model for other parts of the state.



A solid future for Naval Air Station Whidbey

I requested, and the Legislature budgeted, \$2.7 million to create a buffer around NAS Whidbey. This will allow Oak Harbor to purchase 17.7 acres of adjacent land, known as an “accident potential zone,” to prevent nearby development and to ensure the long-term viability of NAS Whidbey to conduct flight and training operations. This shields NAS Whidbey, which accounts for more than two-thirds of employment for all of Island County, from possible inclusion in congressional base-closing plans. The city of Oak Harbor will own the land, which will be reforested, and the federal government will own an easement.

Tell me what's on your mind

Please join me at my upcoming town halls, where I will discuss the recent legislative session and answer any questions you might have.

Monday, April 17

Snohomish County – 4 p.m.

Josephine Sunset Home • 9901 272nd Place N.W.,
Stanwood

Skagit County – 7 p.m.

LaConner High School Library • 502 N Sixth St.

Tuesday April 18

North/Central Whidbey – 4 p.m.

Coupeville Recreational Hall • 901 N.W. Alexander St.

South Whidbey – 7 p.m.

Langley United Methodist Church • 301 Anthes Ave.

Your tax dollars at work in the 10th District

A sampling of projects in the 10th District:

Camano Island – State Route 532 intersection improvements	\$8,000,000
Stanwood – Bryant Well treatment	\$3,194,733
Purchase of buffer around NAS Whidbey	\$2,700,000
Oak Harbor – State Route 20 Quiet Cove wave transmission main	\$2,694,500
Stanwood – 271st St. N.W. trunk sewer	\$2,031,500
Holmes Harbor – SD WWTP storage and redundancy	\$950,000
Skagit Comprehensive Irrigation District plan	\$400,000
Deception Pass State Park upgrade	\$350,000
Camano Island State Park upgrade	\$300,000
Possession Point upgrade	\$250,000

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